Buffalo Bill Rodeo

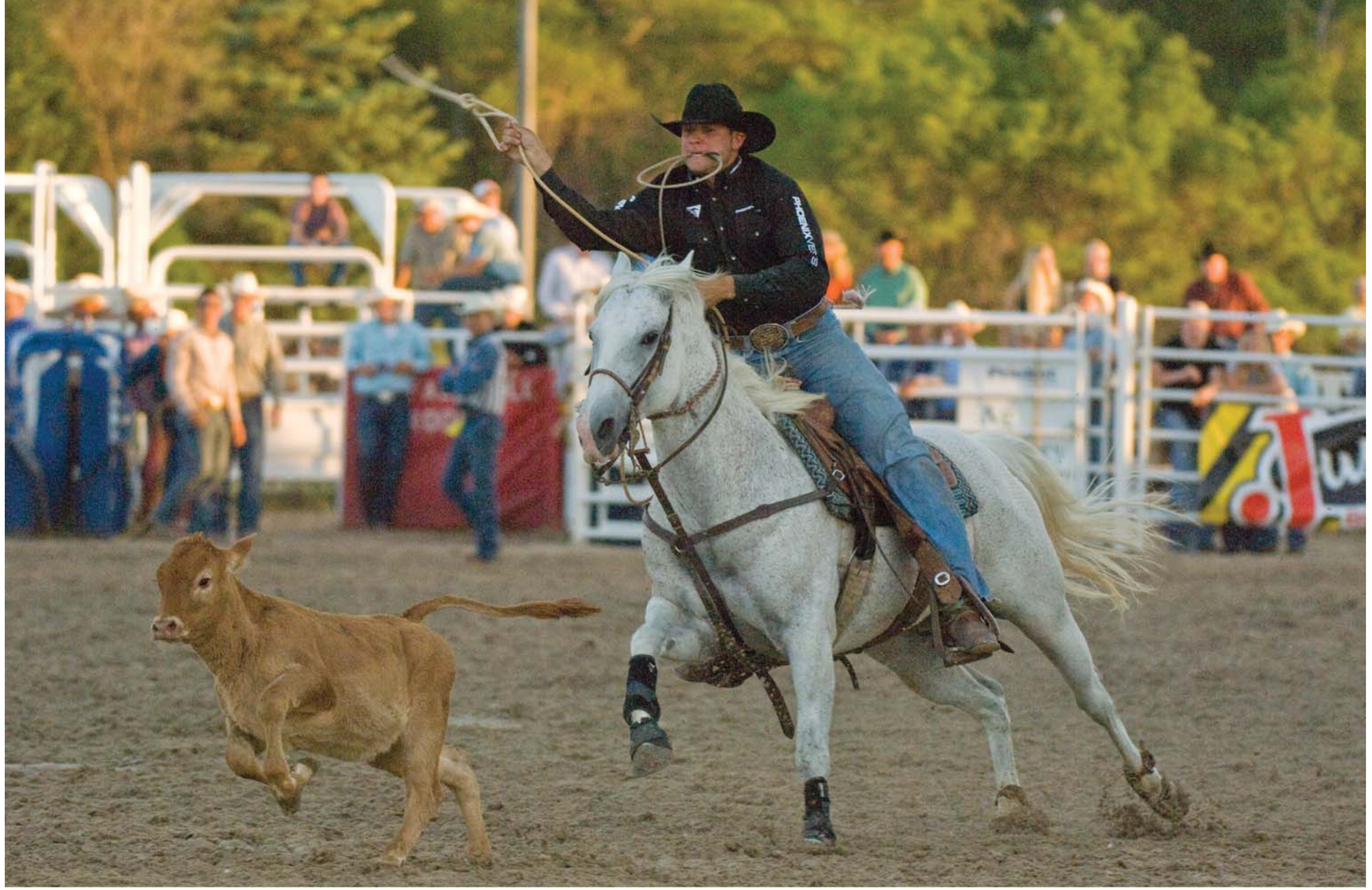
Text and photos by Jon Farrar

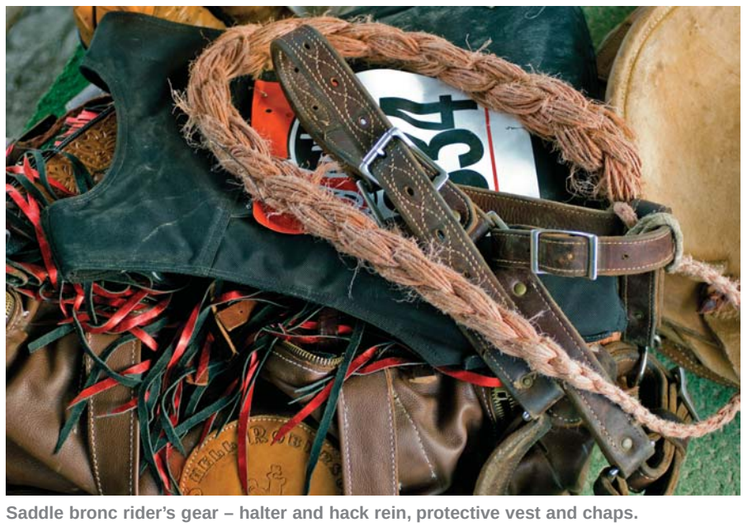
Not until the 1920s did the word rodeo come into common usage. Seeing who could ride a bucking bronco the longest or rope a calf the quickest was probably infomal competition in ranch country a hundred years earlier.

While Nebraska has as legitimate a claim to be the home of the first rodeo as any – Buffalo Bill's Old Glory Blowout celebration in North Platte in 1882 – it is impossible to assign that honor to any specific time or place unless rodeo is so narrowly defined as to be meaningless. The first rodeos were organic – like mushrooms, they just grew from spawn in the soil whenever ranch hands gathered around a corral and put a little hard-earned cash on who they thought was the best rider or roper. Rodeo is the only American sporting activity that grew out of a real working occupation.

The word rodeo came from the Spanish word *rodear,* (pronounced ro-day-oh). As originally used, the word rodeo meant rounding up livestock. An 1851 California statute, for example, states that: "Every owner of a stock farm shall be obliged to give, yearly, one general Rodeo within the limits of his farm, from the first day of April until the thirty-first day of July…in order that parties interested may meet, for the purpose of separating their respective cattle…." In the United States, during the days of running cattle on unfenced government rangeland, the

Above: Competition between cowboys after round-ups was probably the beginning of rodeos. By the early 1900s, they were common Fourth of July events in small towns. Right: Michelle Boesart, Miss Nebraska Rodeo 2010, at last year's Buffalo Bill rodeo.





Saddle bronc rider's gear – halter and hack rein, protective vest and chaps.

In the calf-roping event, contestants are timed roping a running calf, dismounting and tying three of its legs together.

equivalent word was "round-up."

As the story goes, and it is almost surely correct, in the late-1700s and early 1800s in Mexico and what later became the United States' southwest, vaqueros (hired hands on large cattle ranches, call them the original North American cowboys if you want) were said to compete against one another in such things as roping and bronc riding at the end of roundups. The same custom soon appeared on the Great Plains after cattle were gathered from large ranches to be sorted and some shipped to market. Such cowboy competitions surely drew crowds, but were too informal to be called rodeos. And the competition was little removed from real ranch work, such as breaking horses and roping calves. Bull riding apparently was a Spanish tradition that grew out of the even more dangerous competition of bull wresting, and bore no resemblance at all to any form of useful ranch work.

Some researchers state the first real rodeo, even though it was not called that, was held in Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 1872. That tradition continues as the Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo, which claims to be the largest outdoor rodeo. Some assign the first rodeo to Pecos, Texas, in 1883, as it was the first to offer prizes to contestants; or to Prescott, Arizona, in 1888 because it was the first to charge spectators an admission fee. However the first rodeo is defined, there is little doubt Buffalo Bill Wild West Shows were

Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park

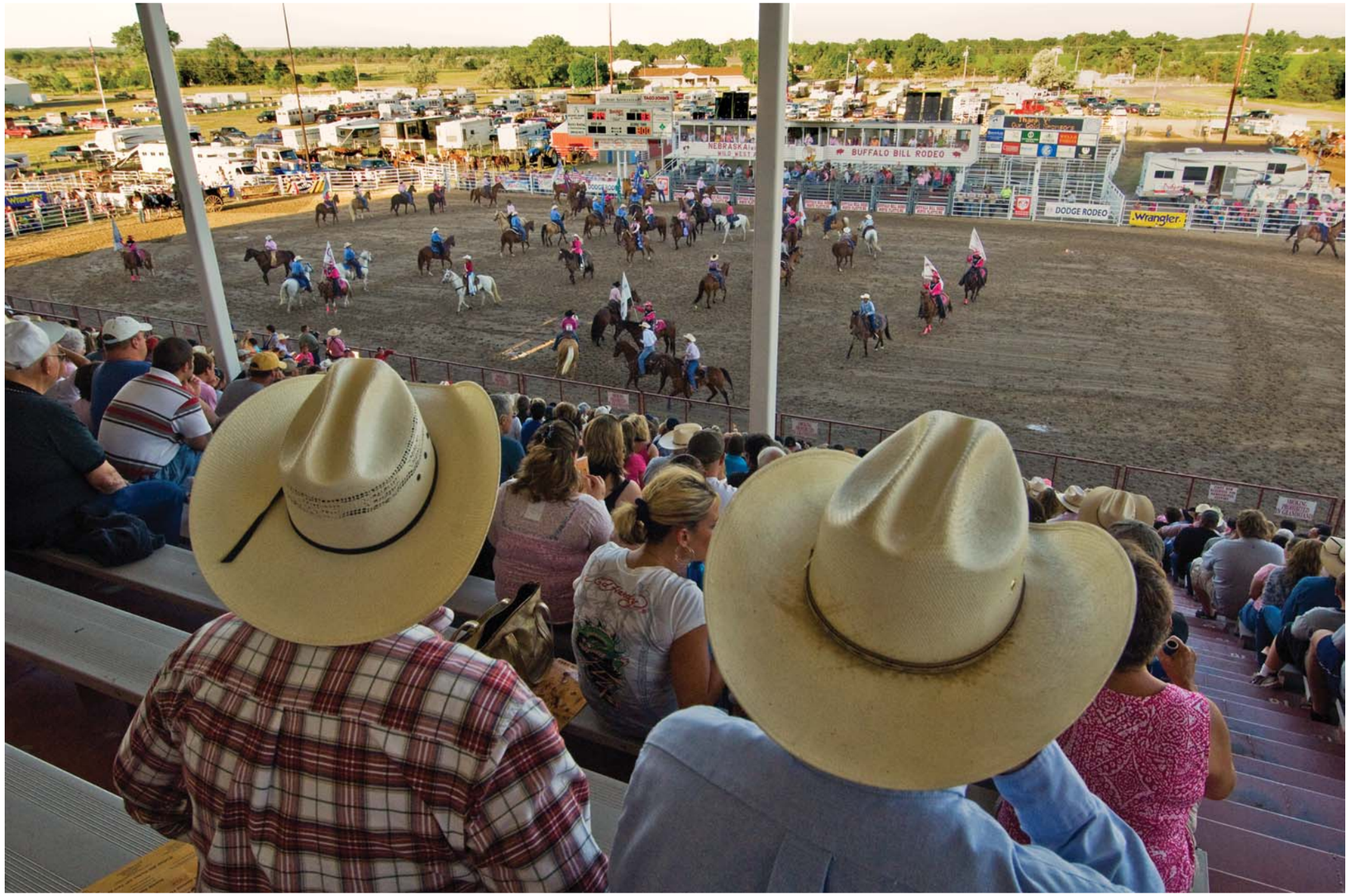
Right next door to the Wild West Arena where the annual Buffalo Bill Rodeo is held, is part of what once was Buffalo Bill's ranch on the north edge of North Platte. It became a state historical park in 1965. When William F. Cody was at the height of his show business career, he owned about 4,000 acres there and appropriately called his home Scout's Rest, his retreat from the hectic show business world.

Cody was born in 1846 in Iowa. He hired out as an ox-team driver when only 11 years old. In 1859 he went with other hopeful gold prospectors to Colorado and in 1860 signed on as a Pony Express rider. Although too young to enlist in the army during the Civil War, he served as a dispatch messenger and scout for the Union Army. After the war he was paid to hunt bison to feed workers on the Kansas Pacific Railroad, and was reported to have killed 4,280 animals in eight months; but he earned his title "Buffalo Bill" in shooting competition with another professional bison hunter. He was an Army scout for General George Armstrong Custer in campaigns against American Indians; and in 1872 he guided the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia on a bison hunting expedition in southwestern Nebraska.

Cody had his beginning as a showman in Ned Buntline's stage play about the old west. After another stint as Army guide, he began touring eastern cities portraying scenes of battles with the Sioux. In 1882 he organized and staged the first Old Glory Blowout celebration in North Platte, an event often credited with being the beginning of rodeos. It also was the beginning of his Wild West Show. From 1883 into 1886, Cody toured the U.S., and in 1887 he took the show on a tour in England. It also played next to the 1893 Chicago World Fair. He enlarged his show and again toured Europe in 1902. Cody was always ready to roll the dice, and so was susceptible to questionable investments. He was forced to sell Scout's Rest Ranch in 1911 and died destitute in 1917 in the Denver home of a sister.

Today the historical park encompasses 16 acres that includes Buffalo Bill's house, built in 1886, and barn and outbuildings that have been restored to their original condition and filled with Cody memorabilia. Adjacent to the park is a 233-acre state recreational area providing picnicking, camping and hiking. There are 23 pad sites with 50 amp electrical hookups; as well as tent camping areas. For additional information see: http://outdoornebraska.ne.gov/parks

Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park is located in northwestern North Platte. From Interstate 80 at North Platte, take U.S. Highway 83 north to U.S. Highway 30, west two miles, then north on Bufalo Bill Avenue. Open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 24 to Memorial Day, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Memorial Day to Labor Day, closed Labor Day; 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday after Labor day.



While rodeos would seem to be mostly a draw for rural folks, from their beginning they've fascinated city people as well. Two old cowboys found quiet seats near top of the grandsatand at the 2010 Buffalo Bill Rodeo in North Platte.

instrumental in promoting their popularity.

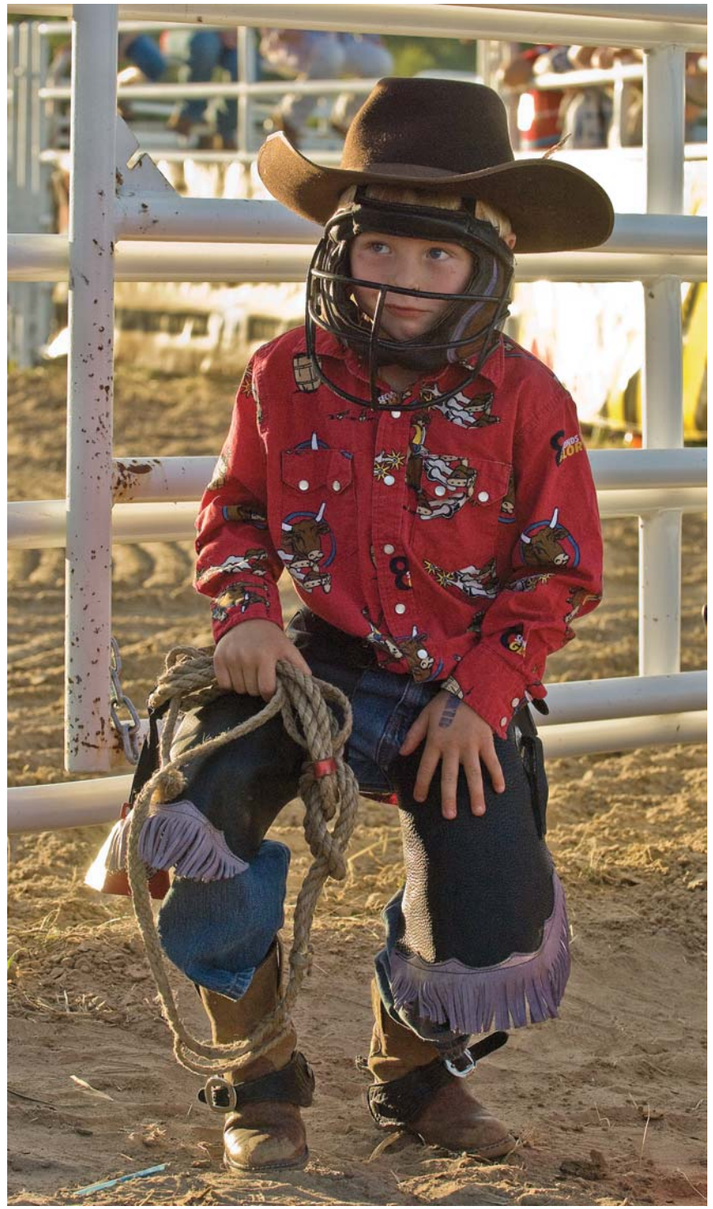
It was not until the 1920s that the word rodeo was commonly used, even among those competing in the sport. That same decade, rodeos became large organized events, staged not just for public entertainment but entrepreneurial profit and, like the wild west shows that preceded them, included such events as trick and fancy roping and riding. Women competed in the same events as men until 1929, when one of the country's best female competitors, Bonnie McCarroll, died of an injury sustained in a bronc riding event. It apparently remained acceptable for men to die in rodeo events.

Rodeos were immensely popular in large eastern cities. Rodeos billed as "championship competition" were held at New York's Madison Square Garden, the first in 1922. Even during the depression of the 1930s, some cowboys were earning more rodeoing than were teachers or dentists. Of course teachers and dentists rarely end a work day with broken ribs. American rodeos were staged in Europe, the Far East and South America before World War II.

Rodeo promoters organized before the cowboys offering up their bodies for small purses and audience entertainment did. In 1929, the Rodeo Association of America formed to promote the sport, but not until 1936 did those competing form their own organization, the Cowboys Turtle Association (CTA). It is said "turtles" was part of the organization's name as the cowboys were slow to organize but finally stuck out their necks. During a rodeo billed as the "world championship" in Boston the calf ropers, bull and bronc riders went on strike, refusing to compete in protest of purses smaller than promised, poor promotion, incompetent (if not unfair) judging, and a lack of uniform rules. The CTA sanctioned no women's contests. In 1945, the organization was renamed the Rodeo Cowboys Association, and in 1975 became the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA). America being a capitalistic society, it was predictable that rodeos would become big business and the best of those competing would be financially rewarded, which only seems proper for anyone who would willingly crawl on the back of an enraged bull or jump off a perfectly

Young Texas twirlers Cody Jo Hattery (front) and Gracie Gambio (black hat) hawk pint-sized lariats at the Buffalo Bill Rodeo as Terilynn Riley totes the wares.

Steer wrestling is one of eight rodeo events sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association. Of those, only barrel racing is a womans' event.



Roedy Owen Farrell of Thermopolis, Wyoming, stays behind the arena gates but outfits himelf the same as his father, Will, a professional bull rider.

good horse onto the back of a running steer. Prize money swelled enough that a select few were able to tour and make rodeoing a fulltime profession, at least until dislocated shoulders and rib-punctured lungs forced their retirement. Today, the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas draws nearly 200,000 spectators and attracts about 13 million television viewers.

The PRCA-sanctioned events are saddle bronc riding, bareback riding, bull riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, team roping, and steer roping. Barrel racing is the only women's event sanctioned at PRCA rodeos and was not added until 1968. In response to the PRCA's longtime refusal to sanction women's events, the Girl's Rodeo Association organized in 1948. It later changed its name to the Women's Professional Rodeo Association and has played an important role in bringing women back to rodeo and ensuring purse money for women is the equal of that for men. Since the late-1940s, youth rodeo associations have formed, such as the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association, the National High School Rodeo Association, and the American Junior Rodeo Association. "Old-timers" rodeos have also increased in popularity.

Rodeo competition has grown steadily over the years as purses increased. In 1953, the total prize money awarded at PRCA rodeos was about $2.5 million. Thirty years later it was over $13 million. Today, the best of the cowboys earn well over $100,000 a year. As an example of the earnings possible in professional rodeoing, consider Cody Ohl from Texas, who started in PRCA competition in 1994. His specialties were team roping, tie-down roping and steer roping. His PRCA career earnings are $2.4 million.

While most rodeos are a certified business, today, the once uncomplicated tradition of rodeos remains alive and well at small town Fourth of July and county fair events.

The annual Buffalo Bill Rodeo (where the photographs for this article were taken last year) is held in conjunction with the NEBRASKAland Days celebration in North Platte and will take place June 15-18 this year. For additional information call (308) 532-7939, (888) 313-5606, or go online to: http://www.nebraskalanddays.com/. ■